

The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America

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Cedar Bluff general store (closed shortly after Plowden's visit), which is represented by two interiors here and three different views in the Iowa book. The bathroom in the Brooklyn Hotel, with its mountain scenery hand-painted on the walls behind the claw-footed tub, is in both books, but only in this essay does Plowden tell of the itinerant Bavarian artist who came to decorate the hotel walls. Such anecdotes lend background and interest to many of the pictures, but Plowden chiefly lets the pictures speak for themselves, providing only brief captions with the place and year they were taken, and the names of individual persons, businesses, and so forth when they are specifically portrayed.

Plowden's essay is devoted to an account of the evolution of his native community of Putney, Vermont, as he knew it from the 1940s to the early 1990s, and to observations from the other towns (chiefly midwestern) in which he has lived and worked. He describes the factors—the "automobilization of America" (45) and the growth of agribusiness—which led inevitably to changing or destroying the towns' purposes and identities. He photographs, however, not the most blatant results of that change, such as the now familiar "nation-wide mega-chains [that have] come to squat like vultures at a town's fringes" (45), but seeks out the remaining elements that, in contrast, document "our cherished individuality and ingeniousness" (46). Plowden's images are sharply focused and varied in subject and composition, providing a wealth of material to stimulate interest and thought regarding the fate of these communities.

The La Follettes of Wisconsin: Love and Politics in Progressive America, by Bernard A. Weisberger. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994. xvii, 318 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY HERBERT F. MARGULIES, UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII, MANOA

The political careers of two strong men, Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin and Albert B. Cummins of Iowa, paralleled and intertwined for two decades. Both men were reform governors at the inception of the Progressive movement after 1900; both went to the Senate as progressive Republicans; both aspired to the presidency. La Follette and Cummins both reflected the midwestern brand of isolationism, which had a large progressive component, and both battled against the armed ship bill in 1917, fearing involvement in World War I. Sometimes they worked together, but often they were rivals. Eventually their careers diverged. Cummins grew more conservative; La Follette continued to trumpet unreconstructed progressivism until his death

in 1925. Cummins was the more accomplished legislator at the national level—witness especially the landmark Esch-Cummins Transportation Act of 1920—but the more flamboyant, dramatic, and uncompromising La Follette captured the public imagination and that of historians. Now Bernard A. Weisberger revisits La Follette, and with him his family.

From the start, the author is frank about his lifelong admiration for La Follette. At the end he says, "I wrote this book so that we should remember La Follette. . . . I want more of us to remember him because of his blazing courage and because he kept insisting that democracy was a life and involves constant struggle, and that we could do better" (318). Yet the topic of the book is not just "Old Bob" but the whole La Follette family. The connection is that family support was essential to La Follette in his difficult and prolonged crusade. But the book also deals with the personal stories of the family members: Bob's wife, Belle, and their children, Fola, Bob Jr., Phil, and Mary. The connection between that topic and Weisberger's underlying purpose is more psychological than logical. The family story, parts of which have been previously told, may lure the reader to a fresh appreciation of "Old Bob," who in the author's opinion has been unkindly and unfairly treated by historians for forty years.

Weisberger is partly successful respecting "Old Bob." Wisely, he reminds readers that the crusading, idealistic, courageous La Follette of legend, the apostle of the "old religion" of democracy, is more credible if one recalls the optimistic faith in progress and democracy and in personal nobility that infused the Progressive movement. In addition, the copious family letters on which the book chiefly relies reveal in starker detail than before some of the facts of La Follette's self-sacrifice, including the rigors of the incessant speaking tours that La Follette undertook to meet the expenses of his family and his magazine.

If Bob La Follette is the true subject of the book, however, then it is not wholly successful. The La Follette legend began in his own family, and in his letters he cultivated it. For evidence of personal ambition as a driving force, and with it political expediency, one needs to consult sources besides the family papers—manuscript collections such as those of William Chandler, for example. But the author's use of collateral secondary and especially primary sources is limited.

With regard to the family, as a group and individually, the family papers are more than adequate as a principal source, and the book tells us much that is new. The family was extraordinary, bound together not only by affection but by a common devotion to the "religion" of democracy and to the leadership role of "Old Bob."

Friends and spouses were chosen to reinforce the family's solidarity. Subordination to the cause and to "Old Bob" worked for most of the family members, in part. Belle gave unwavering emotional support, handled political and personal affairs, wrote for the magazine, and began the biography of her husband after his death. "Young Bob" served as secretary to his father and then as his successor in the Senate. Phil took over Wisconsin affairs and served as governor. Fola devoted much of her life to completion of the biography and the organization of the family papers. Only Mary, to her deep regret, felt unable to contribute.

At the same time, for Belle and her children, the struggle for personal identity was difficult. It was also hard to adhere to the initial faith and to the requirements of a dynastic crusade in the face of changing times. "Young Bob's" suicide in 1953 at the age of fifty-eight was only the most extreme reflection of troubles that all of La Follette's children experienced. Belle, by contrast, gained self-confidence with time and came into her own as a speaker in the woman suffrage campaign.

Eggs in the Coffee, Sheep in the Corn: My Seventeen Years as a Farmwife, by Marjorie Myers Douglas. Midwest Reflections Series. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1994. 247 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95 cloth, \$15.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG, ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Eggs in the Coffee, Sheep in the Corn is the story of an extremely reluctant farm wife. In 1943 Don Douglas took his wife, Marjorie, and his daughter, Anne, away from their comfortable life in St. Paul, Minnesota, to a stock ranch in western Minnesota. His aging parents needed him; and Marjorie, with reservations, agreed to the experiment.

Marjorie had been raised in Minneapolis by professional parents. Her father was a professor at the University of Minnesota, and her mother had been a librarian at Northwestern University prior to her marriage. Before her own marriage, Marjorie had completed college and spent several years as a medical social worker in New York City. After returning to Minnesota and marrying Don Douglas in 1937, she worked at Gillette State Hospital for Crippled Children until becoming pregnant with her first child in 1942. Nothing in her career had prepared her for life on a 1,200-acre stock ranch in western Minnesota.

It was a difficult transition. Marjorie left behind her "dream home" for a well-worn farmhouse without running water. Her father-in-law, although recovering from a heart attack, still maintained con-

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